

**School Board Budget Advisory Committee Statement  
Before  
Alexandria City Council  
Monday, April 4 Public Hearing**

Mr. Mayor, Madame Vice Mayor, Members of the City Council, my name is Wolf Ramm, and I chair the School Board Budget Advisory Committee. On behalf of the Committee, I speak in support of the Alexandria City Public Schools' (ACPS) proposed FY 2006 Operating Budget and FY 2006 to FY 2011 Capital Improvement Program (CIP).

We have worked with the Superintendent's staff and the School Board during the formulation of these budget proposals. In our view, they have done an excellent job of balancing their responsibility to provide for the educational needs of our students against the limited resources that the City's budget can realistically support.

Before addressing the proposals, we offer several contextual observations on the level of resources provided and the unique needs of the Alexandria student body.

With regard to resource levels, ACPS tends to fall in the middle of the pack of comparable, surrounding jurisdictions. For the nine Washington, DC suburban school districts, the following table summarizes per student spending (in which Alexandria ranks third), average teacher salary (in which Alexandria ranks third), and average class size (in which Alexandria ranks sixth).

Table 1

Jurisdiction	Per Student Spending	Average Teacher Salary	Average Class Size
Alexandria City	3-\$13,670	3-\$59,644	6-21.4
Arlington County	1-\$15,298	2-\$61,827	3-19.8
Fairfax County	5-\$11,022	4-\$57,258	4-20.8
Falls Church City	2-\$14,106	5-\$56,343	7-21.7
Loudon County	6-\$10,266	6-\$55,805	9-22.7
Manassas City	7-\$10,137	7-\$54,778	2-19.1
Prince William County	8-\$8,939	9-\$50,215	1-17.2
Montgomery County, MD	4-\$12,108	1-\$63,131	7-21.7
Prince George's County, MD	9-\$8,612	8-\$51,087	5-21.3

In reviewing this data, however, you should note that Alexandria is an expensive place—our spending does not go as far as in some surrounding jurisdictions. In particular, we likely pay more to attract and retain superior teachers and staff because of extremely high housing costs. The age of our physical plant and the lack of space for expansion and

facilities, such as playing fields, increase our operating and capital costs. Resources Alexandria dedicates to public education seem to be in the same ballpark as what surrounding jurisdictions provide, but they are by no means extravagant judged by this standard of comparison.

With regard to student needs, ACPS faces greater challenges than surrounding jurisdictions. Multiple indicators suggest that our students' needs are greater than those in surrounding jurisdictions. For the nine Washington, DC suburban school districts, the following table summarizes free or reduced-price lunch eligibility (in which Alexandria ranks first), English as a second language (in which Alexandria ranks third), and special education services (in which Alexandria ranks fourth).

Table 2

Jurisdiction	Free or Reduced Price Lunch Eligible	English as a Second Language	Special Education
Alexandria City	1-47.1%	3-15.0%	4-24.4%
Arlington County	3-36.1%	1-23.1%	1-29.8%
Fairfax County	7-19.1%	4-12.8%	2-29.5%
Falls Church City	9-7.4%	9-4.1%	6-16.3%
Loudon County	8-10.3%	8-5.0%	8-10.9%
Manassas City	5-23.0%	2-21.7%	9-2.6%
Prince William County	4-23.7%	6-7.5%	7-16.2%
Montgomery County, MD	6-22.6%	5-8.6%	5-23.6%
Prince George's County, MD	2-46.0%	7-6.3%	3-25.8%

Given the level of resources and the significant challenges cited, ACPS has performed very well in recent years—achieving accreditation for 12 out of 16 schools under what were expected to be very difficult standards is a notable accomplishment. Room for substantial improvement remains; additional resources might bring that improvement. That is, ACPS is definitely not at a point of diminishing returns in its use of resources.

With that context in mind, we would like to turn to the City Manager's funding proposal.

With regard to the operating budget, we note that the overall level and growth of funding that the City budget has provided to for schools in recent years has been generous. The overall increase of 7.5 percent for 2006 continues that trend—it allows for some expansion of programs and services that will be put to very good use.

However, we would note that the practical effect of the \$620,000 "technical" adjustment proposed by the City Manager will be to reduce resources available for school programs—which we have just argued are likely to be quite productive in making needed improvements in student performance. The City Manager has adjusted the budget based on a belief in a high level of vacancy savings. We note that vacancy savings are among

the most difficult factors to project in budgeting, particularly in school settings. Retirements are difficult to forecast and the experience and quality of available teachers to fill vacancies varies. Additionally, the schools can not simply leave a vacancy unfilled to achieve a target savings; classrooms require teachers. In order to protect against a shortfall in compensation funds, ACPS will have to reduce budgeted amounts in other categories to accommodate this \$690,000 adjustment, reducing services to students. We strongly urge you to restore this item in the ACPS budget.

With regard to the Capital Improvement Program, the City Manager has reduced the School Board's request for renovations and expansion at the Minnie Howard Ninth Grade Center by \$10.6 million over FY 2009 and FY 2010. The City Manager indicates that further analysis of enrollment trends and construction costs are needed and funding will be identified in a future CIP. ACPS has made that analysis and developed an appropriate budget. We believe that the downward adjustment is too large relative to any weakness in future enrollment. Much of the cost of this project reflects bringing a building completed in 1954 into line with current programmatic needs and standards—not just expanding for additional enrollment. Moreover, some of the cost increase from the City Council approved project budget reflects the two-year delay to accommodate the T.C. Williams project. This delay adds substantially to expected building costs. In our view, a CIP that realistically reflects the school's pending capital needs would include a higher level of funding for Minnie Howard over the FY 2009 and FY 2010 period. We see no reason to leave a project in the CIP at a level of funding we know to be inadequate.

With those observations in mind, we thank you for your considering our comments and express our continued appreciation for the increasing support the City budget has provided for ACPS in recent years.